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## **'Against what you did': Interpersonal Distances and Morality in *Decalogue 5***

**by Steve Jones**

'...the encounter with the Other is my responsibility for him...  
the taking upon oneself the fate of the other'  
(Levinas, 2006: 88)

*Decalogue 5* is centered upon two pivotal acts of violence - a murder and an execution - the ambivalent natures of which form the basis of my reading here. While capital punishment appears to dominate as a central political motif, the topic also raises more universal issues regarding the moral self. In many respects the film is of a specific place and time; Kieslowski himself affirms that he 'wanted to describe the Polish world' (Kieslowski, 1993: 160), especially in terms of its economic hardships; '[c]haos and disorder ruled Poland in the mid-1980s - everywhere, everything, practically everybody's life' (Kieslowski, 1993: 143). However, even this agenda quickly becomes more unifying in scope, as Kieslowski qualifies that politics 'define where we are and what we're allowed or aren't allowed to do, but they don't solve the really important human questions...politics were never the subject' of the *Decalogue* films (Kieslowski, 1993: 144). The Poland of *Decalogue 5* is rooted in the economic climate of the 1980's, but the depiction of a place 'where people don't have any pity for each other...a world of people living alone' is far broader than a solely political analysis might suggest (Kieslowski, 1993: 160). So it may seem that the film had a 'direct political impact in the suspension of Poland's death penalty' (Maurer, 2000: 68), yet Kieslowski intimates that his central theme is 'loneliness', asserting that that the film is about 'killing in general'.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, in the reading that follows, the modes of characterisation and moral positions raised will be conceived as indicative of general concern with the human condition.<sup>2</sup>

I will begin by exploring the emphasis the film places upon inter-personal distances. The film's tone is epitomised by its detached mode of illustrating violent incursions, and this represents both the social fragmentation of the characters in their setting (which leads to murder), and the assumed objectivity of the Law (which seeks retribution for homicide). The stresses placed on observation directly implicate the audience's own voyeuristic intent into its moral schema, collapsing the formal spaces between characters and audience. Witnessing and judgement - which are central narrative issues - are problematised by the ambiguity of the character's actions. Even though I discuss the line between legitimised and illegitimate violence, I am not concerned with the death penalty debate so much as what that comparison suggests about moral consequence more generally. The supposedly abstract nature of the Law

<sup>1</sup> Moreover, he even appears to suggest that the linking of the film to the political debate surrounding capital punishment was coincidental (Kieslowski, 1993: 166).

<sup>2</sup> My argument remains secular for reasons of space. For a religious discussion of capital punishment, see Temple, 1945.

which proclaims "right" and "wrong" is depicted according to formal and narratological devices which relate to that perceptual and ethical evaluation system. The development undertaken by the audience corresponds with that of Piotr, who begins the film as an embodiment of legal principle, and concludes in personal protest against its methodologies. His journey then, especially given his problematic affiliation with the Law, encapsulates Levinas' proposal that we are reciprocally responsible for each other, and underscores problems arising from Kant's assertion that the populous is brought into 'union...through common laws...Each person is supposed to be both a maker and obeyer of certain common laws of conduct' (Sorell, 1987: 69). Ultimately, in focusing communal ills upon the single subject, the execution thematically denotes that individuals are more generally fractured from the culture to which they "belong".

## **Observation/Alienation - Witnessing:**

We will begin with a dissection of the problems of observation - how the form and narrative are structured to both involve and disengage the audience - in order to probe the nature of judgement. Jacek's alienation is most clearly designated by his behaviours, which indicate 'proneness to boredom...lack of realistic long-term plans, and impulsivity' - all of which also typify psychopathology (Jones, 2000: 42). Appositely, the Othering process (condemnation of and dissociation from the murderer) is not as easy as the viewer may hope, as Waldemar (the taxi driver and erstwhile victim of homicide) is shown in parallel to Jacek, aimlessly wasting his day with asocial behaviours. Early on, Jacek witnesses a violent scuffle (doing nothing to intervene), in juxtaposition to Waldemar ogling the grocer girl from afar - meaning the kind of voyeurism we undertake as viewers is coded as ugly and morally questionable from the outset. Jacek's mischievous coffee flicking in the cafe is juxtaposed with Waldemar needlessly scaring passing dogs with his car horn. While neither incident is malicious in intent, it is Jacek's that is the more gregarious (accompanied by shared smiles), even if it is a display of socially unacceptable behaviour. In both cases, the perpetrator is framed within (a building and car, respectively), and therefore they are distanced from the object of their unruliness by a pane of glass. Social fragmentation is rendered a collective experience here, as we too are positioned *within* (the café and the car), and are thus aligned with the perspective of either perpetrator (even if we are separated from them by the screen).

Such "everyday" misanthropy is crucial in order to ascertain how we are to engage with the violence that follows, especially as it centres upon Jacek's willingness to step beyond the "anonymity" protection of the glass to interact with Waldemar, just as Piotr transgresses the clinical reticence of the Law through which he is meant to maintain empirical objectivity from Jacek's behaviour. The form itself further implicates the viewer as part of the hostile paradigm, as it is shaped by the character's isolation. The cinematography is polluted by filters as an expression of the protagonist's mutual world-view; 'if you put a green filter on the camera, the world becomes much crueller, duller and emptier' (Kieslowski, 1993: 161). Character-sentience influences form in this sense, highlighting that perception is not empirical - it is tainted by emotional mediation. Consequently, the audience is involved in Kieslowski's vision of the modern condition, in which 'we haven't got any time left for feelings...for passion', even to the extent that murder becomes unmotivated and

detached (Kieslowski, 1993: 145-6). Once again, the conceptual spaces between viewer and screen fluctuate between disruption and re-enactment.

Even during the central instances of death, observation is again foregrounded; Jacek stares Waldemar in the eyes before deciding to cover his head, just as Jacek's eyes are covered before the execution. Crucially, perception is inextricable from judgement; the presence of the witnessing Other actualises condemnation, if only as a projection-extension of the perpetrator's guilt - as Pizzorno reveals, 'when a person chooses, he has in mind the judgement that another person will give of the outcome of this choice' (Turner and Rijord, 2006: 387).<sup>3</sup> This is exacerbated by the omnipresence of Kieslowski's every-witness; '[t]here's this guy who wanders around in all the [*Decalogue*] films...He watches us, our lives. He's not very pleased with us...he is a sort of sign or warning to those whom he watches, if they notice him' (Kieslowski, 1993: 158-9). He functions as an omnipresent caution against violence, further implicating the ever-pervasive audience of the film as external judges.

In alignment with our call to witness violence, the film appears to maintain a glib disconnection from the events. This impression derives from the coldness with which the characters interact (even in the murder sequence), as social fragmentation is made lucid. Jacek remains detached from the murder just as the guards uphold their impersonal professionalism during the execution. Yet, we begin to compensate for this lack of overt emotion (Mayerfield, 1999: 13), meaning that the horror of either death is essentially our own. Moreover, our engagement is paralleled by Piotr, who too protests the execution, even if he is not present for the murder. I will attend to the audience's relation to Piotr's journey presently - suffice it to say that Kieslowski allows the audience closure on events through Piotr's own denouement, whereby he (and we) realise that one cannot maintain two contradictory positions - horrified and objectively distanced - simultaneously. Piotr is crucial for the audience, as he is the cipher through which we can eventually come to terms with violence emotively, because he acts as what Cerulo terms as our 'point of entry' into the text. Piotr frames the narrative, and so ultimately the tale is defined by his presence. He is also 'doublecast' - that is placed in a morally ambiguous position - thereby 'encourag[ing] the audience to consider multiple dimensions of the violence in question' (Cerulo, 1998: 50). In what follows than, I will investigate what we are to make of violence in this social context.

## **Violence and Social Responsibility:**

The two instances of violence we encounter are separated by their social coding or moral sanctioning. As Goodman asserts,

Two kinds of violence are...distinguished using dichotomies such as public-private, legal-illegal, legitimate-illegitimate, useful-harmful etc. These are only distinguishable by the partisan justification given to one. In fact, one is termed positively - for example punishment or the enforcement of Law and order - while the other is *censured* as violence (Sumner, 1996: 160).

<sup>3</sup> See also Bull, 1973: 35-68.

As the moral uncertainty of characterization may insinuate, these types of violence are more alike than the discourses that code "legitimacy" would suggest. As Walter Benjamin contends 'everything in the Law is always already violence, from its origins to its modes of conflict resolution, since in order to impose its own rule the Law is forced to resort to violence, punishment' (Sumner, 1996: 179). Thus the commandment "Thou Shalt not Kill" is clearly levelled at *all humans* in the narrative, no matter what institution they belong to.

At this point we may wish to question what the function of the death sentence is, or what claims the authorities make to justify taking the life of another. Jones avers that,

the two main approaches [in a determination of the purposes of punishment] have been described as "consequentialist", where the punishment is targeted at affecting the offender's (or other's) future conduct, and "retributive", where the punishment is commensurate with the amount of harm the offender has caused (Jones, 2000: 137).

Vollmann's multifaceted dissection of punishment (Vollmann, 2005: 383) also permits us to more pertinently dissect what the ramifications of punitive measures are, and place them in the context of the narrative. In this case, punishment cannot 'improve' the offender, nor can it 'isolate' him in any other sense than it can remove his body from society. Arguably, Jacek was already socially self-isolated - this seemingly being intertwined with the cause of the crime - it can only prevent him from causing further harm. The chastisement also cannot 'restore a balance of honour' or 'compensate, gratify or sooth the victim'. Here, the victim dies, and we are denied any view of his grieving loved ones, hence we cannot allocate such repercussions to the violence from his perspective - just as we do not see the car crash that results from Jacek rolling the rock off the bridge, even if we hear the consequences. In this instance, the best the Law can hope for is to 'make him [here, Jacek] accept, or at least charge him with, responsibility of his crime' and 'assert a social norm' (Vollmann, 2005: 383).

Execution may seem an extreme sentence as nothing can be gained at the level of the individual, but it plays out the macro-societal moral compass *as if* its ordinances are incontestable by ensuring the verdict is final. The line between killer and executioner is only contextual - a binary that sanctions one set of actions and vilifies another. However, Kieslowski equally seeks to disrupt this opposition. The execution is shared among a number of individuals organized into a collective (as made apparent by their uniforms), and this symbolically implicates the whole state in whose name the execution is imposed. Even if we are not active in enforcing justice (as those marked by uniforms are), we tacitly comply with its implementations; 'the average citizen washes his hands of all responsibility and leaves it (silently) to the official avengers' (Menninger, 1968: 144). Furthermore, Jacek's execution occurs indoors, the enclosed space accentuating the finitude of the act and its knowability. In contrast, the isolating space surrounding Jacek and Waldemar in the initial murder sequence is explicitly without witnesses, stressing their alienation. The absence of delineated margins in this scene is apposite to convey our lack of awareness regarding Jacek's homicidal motivations. In this respect, we are connected with both murders - as one with the group of guards who execute Jacek, and in our absence from the murder of

Waldemar, which connotes our responsibility to fellow humans to quell such violence before it occurs. The aforementioned implication of audience in relation to onscreen violence exacerbates the position of the viewer here, indicating that we are both distanced from each Other and contrarily intimately involved with other subjects. As Levinas asserts, social accountability results in a paradox, whereby 'the Face of the Other' is 'always...in some way, an incitement to murder' or a call to reject our group commitment, and yet 'the Face is also the "Thou Shalt not Kill"...it is the fact that I cannot let the other die alone' (Levinas, 2006: 89). Our liability to each other - be we citizen or executioner - entails our confrontation with the Other to whom we commit. We cannot rid ourselves of responsibility for our conduct unto them as well as their actions unto us because of our obligation to the communal system by which we recognise the Other as constituent of that system (that is, we must have an Other to commit ourselves to in order that we may *be* social).

Jamie Mayerfield refigures this paradox in concrete terms; '[w]e are social creatures. We come to expect and depend on the help of other people....But when other beings do not act to relieve our suffering, but are themselves the source of it...[they] become a tormenting presence' (Mayerfield, 1999: 90). This is elucidated in Waldemar's unanswered calls for help/mercy which are met only with Jacek's prolonged violence. Piotr's isolated cries to no-one ('I abhor it') are equally futile, and are rejoined only by the emptiness of the Law (or audience silence). It is crucial that the execution scene echoes the murder, as legal imperatives are also a source of suffering to which we are committed (albeit against our will). Society emphasises the good of the mass over that of the individual perpetrator, even if it is focused on the rights of a given individual victim. The Law behaves as if it is 'mitigating our suffering' (Mayerfield, 1999: 90) by negating the anguish of the penalised individual - 'our' vitally being a collective term which calls for concurrence. 'Punishment' then, 'is always the action of a *community* towards its own criminals' rather than 'a limited form of individual violence' (Temple, 1945: 3, my emphasis). Furthermore, as Livingston remarks 'society owes protection to all its members' in return for their complicity into and adherence to an unspoken civic contract (cited by Franklin in Madden et al. 1968: 120).

As part of an argument which is significantly more complex than will come across in this brief summation, Vollmann makes the case that 'a public slaying' is "'better" - more honest, more subject to accountability - than a private one' (Vollmann, 2005: 358). Forsaking the irony that the execution is performed indoors, away from the public "for" whom it is performed, this principle relies on a 'moral calculus' that says the Law is "right" and the killer "wrong", and justifies the motivations of the Law-makers over those of the perpetrator. At the same time, it does not mean that the individual has to concur with the decision in personal, empathetic terms. This is lucidly manifested in Piotr's reaction - he still wishes to have halted the killing, as he announces that he 'was there...in that same park' on the day of the murder. He detests the senseless death of Jacek, although he nevertheless maintains the position that the original slaughter was "wrong". Conversely, it may be argued that the Law (in having a motive - and thus willed intent) is in some way more morally questionable than the apparently motiveless Jacek is - therefore the Law needs to execute in the "public" sphere to be visibly accountable for the killing, to share the burden of liability with the populous in whose name it extinguishes Jacek's life (see Sorell, 1987: 60).



Despite the macro-universal scale, our view remains individually centred, in keeping with Kieslowski's theme of isolation. While Waldemar is mildly antisocial, and Jacek projects his solipsism through fatalistic violence, it is Piotr who remains our social signifier, not only because he is the only one of the three central protagonists who survives the narrative, but also because of his municipal status. As Kieslowski declares,

If you work in politics, or in any other public sphere, you're publicly responsible...[y]ou're always watched by others...But, at the same time...I have a very clear limit as to what I mustn't do, and I try not to do it...And that has nothing to do with any description or exact definition of right or wrong. It has to do with concrete everyday decisions (Kieslowski, 1993: 149).

Piotr embodies social accountability more markedly than any other figure in the narrative, as his public role (defence attorney) is one directly entangled with such issues. Piotr positions himself so as to share responsibility for the original murder in an attempt to denounce his actual role in the 'giant machine' that slaughters Jacek.

Kieslowski uses Piotr as point of entry to allow the audience to access this position (of literal/legal responsibility for Jacek's life), to symbolise our "public" implication in his execution. We are protected by the Law, and it is in our sharing of its moral edicts that we become partially liable for the Law's duties towards us (as public). It is the pull between the rights of the mass (which the Law upholds) and his interaction with the individual (Jacek) that prove irreconcilable for Piotr. As Žižek asserts, 'the distinction between our instinctive abhorrence of witnessing the torture or suffering of an individual with our own eyes, and our abstract knowledge of mass suffering' is reliant on our 'emotional-ethical responses', which are 'conditioned by age-old instinctual reactions of sympathy to suffering and pain witnessed directly' (Žižek, 2008: 36) - indeed, Žižek's Marxist agenda further emphasises the mass/individual divide. In what follows, I will explore Piotr's role in greater depth to outline the paradoxical split between isolated being and that same subject's status as part of a mass/social-institution (governed by Law), and the specific problems it raises.

### **Indivi-duality - Piotr's Split Function:**

According to Levinas, in comparison to 'the rights of man...guaranteed by the state' - the 'justice' of which has 'an immutable significance and stability' - 'freedom in fraternity' affirms 'the responsibility of one-for-the-other' and manifests 'the rights of man...concretely to consciousness as the rights of the other, for which I am answerable' (Levinas, 1993: 125). Social rights constitute the subject as mass and individual simultaneously, and this is Piotr's problematic position. He embodies Dostoevsky's adage that '[a]ll men are responsible for one another and I more than anyone else' (Levinas, 2006: 92). In this case, Piotr is a defender of Jacek by occupation. Yet his declaration 'I abhor it' is evidently more universally focused - his reception of responsibility (onto his *I*) is the reversal of his outwardly vocal projection to the world (that is, he shouts to *everyone*, rather than no-one). It is on this macro-scale that he envisages his accountability, however unrealistically that may be. By the film's conclusion, he has overcompensated for the shift in perspective between

collective and personal. Instead of accepting that he cannot remain detached, or espouse universal criteria upon individual circumstances, he infers total blame upon himself. He does not accept Levinas' proposal that '[t]here is a certain measure of violence necessary in terms of justice; but if one speak of justice, it is necessary to allow judges, it is necessary to allow institutions and the state', instead opting that 'if there were no order of justice, there would be no limit to my responsibility' (Levinas, 2006: 90).

As I have argued in the previous section, in the case of legally sanctioned punishment, 'violence is no longer attributable to concrete individuals and their "evil" intentions, but is purely "objective", systemic, anonymous' (Žižek, 2008: 11). Piotr's journey permits us to personalise the violence allayed both at the hands of the murderer (Jacek - for it is Piotr who names him for us), and the Law (manifested by Piotr himself). Ultimately, we learn *more* about Piotr than Jacek, and this is because of the narrative structure which individualises Piotr, just as the legal system isolates (names and blames) Jacek. The Law pertains to depersonalised morality in its performance, and the narrative seeks to undercut such a claim by demonstrating that moral choice is always subjective - perhaps *this* is what a focus on 'violence which is enacted by social agents, evil individuals' aims to 'distract our attention from' (Žižek, 2008: 9). Our moral *choices* (as opposed to an illusion of moral inevitabilities) are not just political or even empirical, but are personalised - as is evinced by Piotr's frustration. There is a disparity between ideal (the commandment, or the Law) and the reality of its opposition (violence and its affects) which is equally a divergence between distanced (how it should be) and actual (how it is, however unpredictable). These spaces are collapsed by the narrative - it is only in the conclusion where the objectivity of the Law breaks down into emotive response that we come to combine the theoretical/abstract with the personal.

This reading of the cessation is made clear after the court hearing when we first learn Jacek's name. Waldemar remains unnamed until Jacek's execution, underscoring his anonymity, and evincing that the narrative is centred on killer rather than victim (as aforementioned, reaction to his death within the narrative is minimal). The act of naming itself is significant both for the audience to allocate meaning, and for the characters to engage inter-personally - thus Jacek confesses 'when you called my name, tears came to my eyes'. *Identification* bridges the gap between alienation and social reception. As soon as Jacek is labelled, he becomes articulate (a primary indicator of social interaction). This is because he is both signalled as an individual through designation, and also because he has been tried and forced to recognise his civic duty to others via the Law. Conversely, Piotr's moniker is revealed in the opening scene, and this has a profound effect on our perception. The punitive system is supposed to remain objective, faceless; as Sorell discerns, 'principles must get their support not only from moral judgements, but from meeting [appropriate] standards of objectivity and impartiality' (Sorell, 1987: 60). However, Piotr is the filter through which the processes of the Law occur, and are found wanting. For us, Waldemar is a plot device who commands no emotive aftermath. Jacek is too a vehicle, this time for Piotr's journey; therefore foregrounding Piotr as the locus of our moral interest. If the Law is meant to emphasise the lost/transgressed rights of the victims of crime, and to restore balance in that sense, the film subverts this message by reversing the perspective onto the murderer, and personalising the pseudo-objective arbiter of



authority. The individuation of the Law allows us to critique supposedly shared moral judgements as individual subjective choices with no perpetual applicability.

The presence of the Law asserts that there are distinct values of right and wrong that ought to be upheld. Conversely, it equally implies that we are *likely to fail* in our responsibility to one another, marking those judgements as unrealistic, and not in keeping with a given individual's moral conceptions. In personalising the Law, and finding it wanting, the film questions punitive edicts are any more valid than those values enacted by the individual killer.

### **Conclusion - Choice and Freedom:**

Kieslowski presents us with a murder paradigm which is fundamentally depersonalised from the outset - perhaps this is why it is easy to read the film as a didactic critique of contemporaneous Polish punitive legislation. Yet our moral choices (if not our moral contexts) are intimately personal. Ethical decisions have explicitly social repercussions, even if the film chooses not to make a feature of those until its conclusion. The depersonalisation of the characters and their motivations, in combination with prolonged violence seems irreconcilable, yet it allows the audience to emote into the situation through their horror. The emphases placed on observatory dissociation throughout implicitly critiques our emotional coldness towards each other in the modern urban environment, as well as the nature of subjectivity/motivation in opposition to the claims of impartiality (especially moral objectivity) that are embodied by the Law.

From the outset, *Decalogue 5* is framed as Piotr's story - and the journey he undertakes (which the audience follows) is one from supposed extrication to the final annunciation of personal ('I abhor it'). We begin the episode with Piotr's voice which is ultimately detached from the narrative reality (over the opening credits). Even when we do see Piotr, he is isolated and framed by a gilt-edged mirror (connoting his aspiration to reserved objectivity) as he spouts aphorisms about the Law. By the conclusion of the narrative, he comes to realise that such a position is untenable. Notably, during his final protests, he is seated in car in a wooded area - perhaps the actual murder scene. His occupation of such a space underlines his ambivalent moral stance; he at once mimics Waldemar's previous position - tied into the car, unable to escape the oncoming violence - and also Jacek's after the murder.

Despite Piotr's protests about the suitability of the punishment, he remains 'against what [Jacek] did'. The choices an individual makes define the person, because judgement is fundamentally social. What remains unclear is if Piotr 'abhors' Jacek's decision to murder, or his own to uphold the Law. Piotr's frustration arises from the 'inevitable verdict' and his inability to 'correct mistakes' in 'the application of justice'. The Law seems to be infallible as Jacek's inexorable capture (the procedures of arrest and trial) are not depicted here. We may deem that Jacek's fate is already unavoidable, as we do not clearly see the progression leading to murder-motivation, just as we view preparations for the execution, but not the process that leads us there. Consequently, the choices undertaken appear to be arbitrary, inasmuch as the character's destinies seem to be inescapable; no changes to Piotr's closing speech or Jacek's journey in the taxi would make any difference. Part of Piotr's helplessness of course, is that destiny appears inalterable, just as legal decrees ultimately intimate

the difference between right and wrong to be indisputable. It is vital that Jacek does not impede himself from murdering, even when "the witness" signals that he should halt, or in the pause before he finishes Waldemar. Jacek is bound to his fate, yet we should note that he binds *his own* hands.

Jacek's hesitation indicates that he *could* have stopped the murder itself. Our options are limited to a given scope, but we *do* have choices within those confines. Hence, when Jacek asks for a 'cup of tea' in the café, he is told there is none - he instead is limited to 'coffee and cake', so this is exactly what he orders. However, he can choose the type of cake, and does so impetuously. This eagerness to select within a given scope is what is missing from his larger scale decisions. As he binds his hands, Kieslowski cuts to a sequence in which dogs strain against their leads. This juxtaposition of micro-scale, everyday events stresses the pervasiveness of choice/freedom and restraint/oppression throughout our daily lives, which find figurative resonances in moral questions raised by the narrative. Jacek pushes against the moral limitations of his societal environment, and makes the decision to negate them, just as Waldemar arbitrarily provokes the dogs. As Kieslowski proposes 'we are in a position to set our own inner compass. But often, even when we know what is honest and the right thing to do, we can't choose it. I believe we are not free' (Kieslowski, 1993: 150). That is not to suggest that all our actions are pre-determined, ensuring that 'people cannot intelligibly be blamed or punished for what they do' due a lack of will (Sorrel, 1987: 148). When Piotr declares 'people are free' in the opening sequence, we should not be surprised that he contradicts Kieslowski's stance, as his journey ends in concurrence with the director. Finally, as Kant avows, 'because to comply with laws is to comply with laws they each make' through their participation in "society", citizens 'are free or autonomous'. Yet it is simultaneously through such a system of personal responsibility for others that 'they are constrained' (Sorell, 1987: 69).

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